

Utah jail deaths surged back to a concerning high in 2020. What's being done?

By Paighen Hawkins | July 6, 2022, 6:00am | Updated July 7, 2022, 10:38am

More people died in Utah jails in 2020 than in any year since 2016, despite lower facility populations attributed to COVID-19 mitigation efforts, recently released state data shows.

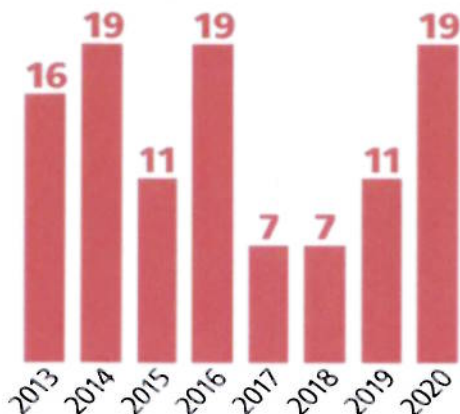
And of those 19 people who died in county jails that year, suicide — not the coronavirus — was the leading cause of death.

The last time that many people died in county facilities, it was a red flag. It marked one of the [highest jail death rates](#) in the nation. Two years later, in 2018, state lawmakers [passed legislation that required annual, statewide tracking and reporting](#) of such deaths. With that data, policymakers agreed, they could identify the problems in jails and pass laws to fix them.

Inmate deaths at Utah jails and prisons

Inmate deaths in Utah trended downward for years following a series of reforms and data collection efforts following a spate of deaths in the mid-2010s. That changed in 2020, when the number of inmates dying at Utah jails and prisons increased significantly — back to the numbers that prompted state action a few years ago.

Number of jail deaths 2013 - 2020



Source: Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice

Utah jail population by month 2019-2020



GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | *The Salt Lake Tribune*

“And that’s kind of where we left it off,” said Sen. Todd Weiler, the data collection bill’s sponsor.

Weiler, R-Woods Cross, said this upcoming session, he planned to circle back to the issue.

We’ve got a couple of years of data now...,” Weiler said, “What are we going to do with it?”

The 2020 report, generated by the state’s Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice based on facility reporting, does show suicide remains a problem in Utah jails. Federal data also shows Utah continues to outpace national averages in rates of both jail deaths and suicides.

Tom Ross, director of the justice commission, declined to comment on the [recently released report](#). The commission is tasked with collecting justice-related data and coordinating with groups to develop policy. He deferred to the involved agencies.